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Soviets Working Against Peace In Lebanon

The Kremlin is too busy with its problems in Afghanistan and Poland to risk meddling directly in Lebanon, but intelligence sources have compiled evidence that the Russians have been quietly doing what they can to undermine the fragile cease-fire arranged in July by the special American envoy, Philip Habib.

If the Soviets can't ensure victory in southern Lebanon by their client, the Palestine Liberation Organization, they at least intend to see that the PLO is strong enough to hold its own if and when the bitter factional fighting resumes in Lebanon, as most experts gloomily predict it will eventually. So the Russians are approving, if not encouraging, shipments of Soviet arms to the PLO by their Arab allies.

Here's what's been happening since the cease-fire took effect on July 24:

- At least five transport planes originating in Libya have flown to Damascus, Syria, carrying some 40 tons of arms and ammunition. Intelligence sources believe the Syrians then delivered the Soviet-made arms to Palestinians in southern Lebanon.

- In early August, a freighter

loaded with arms sailed from Tripoli directly to an undisclosed port in southern Lebanon. A number of ports in the area are believed to be under the PLO's control.

- In the past few weeks, five transport planes flew from Southern Yemen to Damascus, carrying weapons believed to be destined for the PLO in Lebanon.

- The shipment of arms to Palestinian forces in southern Lebanon has been made possible by the presence of PLO units in the south Lebanon areas nominally under control of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). At a recent closed briefing for Congress, representatives of the Israeli Defense Forces estimated there are more than 600 Palestinians operating in the UNIFIL area. A State Department official put the figure at more than 1,000.

While there is no solid evidence that the Soviets are actively encouraging their Arab clients to rearm the PLO in southern Lebanon, one State Department analyst told my associate Lucette Lagnado that "they are not doing anything to stop the shipments," as they easily could.

The Soviets seem determined to strengthen their ties to the PLO. The organization's leader, Yassir Arafat, is expected to travel to Moscow again soon. The PLO's Voice of Palestine radio recently claimed that the Russians were on the verge of granting the Palestinians full diplo-

matic status, with their own mission in Moscow. State Department officials are not sure the Kremlin will go that far yet, but do believe the Soviets will grant the PLO diplomatic recognition soon.

Meanwhile, the United States has resumed arms shipments to Israel, which is, of course, the mainstay of the anti-PLO forces in southern Lebanon. One purpose, apparently, is to let the PLO and other Arab friends of the Soviet Union know that no matter how strong their Russian arms make them feel, they should not think they can break the truce with impunity.

The Reagan administration is determined to make its hard-won cease-fire work. One way to do this would be to strengthen the 6,000-man United Nations peacekeeping force that has been in Lebanon since 1978.

The shaky situation in southern Lebanon is sure to be high on the agenda when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin arrives here tomorrow for talks with high U.S. officials.